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## **The Two Forms of Consciousness**

Teresa Brennan

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# The Two Forms of Consciousness

*Teresa Brennan*

THE STANDARD 'constructivist' position is that one's identity is precisely a social construction. This means not only that women and men, or for that matter whole classes of people, have the characteristics that they do for social as distinct from natural reasons. It also means that explaining change, either in new movements or fresh ideas, is a problem (see Brennan, 1989, 1993). For if everything is socially constructed, how do novel ideas emerge? How does originality, or genius in the extreme case, come into being? This problem is equivalent to the old conundrum of functionalism. How do we know, do or write anything at odds with a received view? How do we explain those moments, or movements, which escape from the compound of socially constructed identifications?

The usual focus in attempts at answering this question is on some form of individual distinctness. Commonly, it is the genes, or individual genius. But this approach begs the question it was designed to answer, in that it does not deal with first, why a genius or independent thinker is just as capable of moments, if not a lifetime, of socially constructed (and for that matter socially approved) banality; and second, why the most socially constructed of people can surprise themselves (and others) with genuinely original insights. It is the fact that some people are original some of the time, rather than the fact that there are geniuses and there are receivers of given views, that is of interest.

In addressing this question, I shall also be proposing a solution to one of the problems of consciousness, insofar as the nature of the difference between conscious and unconscious states is a problem (see, for example, Searle, 1995: 128). It is a solution that depends on a certain interpretation of Freud's concept of the unconscious. But I stress before proceeding further with this that as I am also addressing a key problem for constructivism, this does not mean I disregard the overall significance of the idea that human beings are socially formed creatures, whose gendered and racial distinctness is more a social product than a biological one. Moreover, and this brings me

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- *Theory, Culture & Society* 1997 (SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 14(4): 89–96 [0263-2764(199711)14:4;1-W]

back to where I began, it has to be stressed that the traditional opposition to social constructivism not only comes from a limited reading of biology; it also comes from the argument from *individual* genius and *individual* genes.

Against this, I will be arguing here that what counters the received view is not an individual property, but something held in common, something that is unrealized due to the weight of the socially constructed selves under which we labour.

I want to give a brief illustration of how this 'something' works. I have used the same illustration in a discussion of essentialism, and apologize for repeating it (Brennan, 1993). But nothing else serves my purpose quite so well. After illustrating the 'something', I will turn to Freud to elucidate its peculiar relationship to consciousness, and the unconscious.

In the experience of writing, it is sometimes the case that what ends up on the page has nothing to do with the article that was planned. Now I am told that there are people who know what they are going to say when they start writing and say exactly that. But these people are what we might term perfect subjects, perfect in that their identity and its accompanying preconceptions are never disrupted. They will have difficulty crediting the existence of something that disrupts their conscious intention, their planning.

Those who felt taken over, and have been disconcerted as their argument unfolded in another direction altogether from the one they anticipated, will give me more licence. Of course, once an unplanned idea or argument unfolds it is conscious. It is also new, at least to the one writing it. It need not, however, be new to others writing at the same time, which raises an interesting point. As ideas often occur to more than one person simultaneously, even though there is no connection or communication between the people involved, where do they come from? What Freud termed the ego, by which I mean one's generally conscious identity, is unimpressed with this question, especially if it has done the writing. But it remains a question. Let us look at whether Freud's theory of the unconscious has anything to tell us about it.

Throughout his papers on technique, Freud discusses the relationship between unconscious processes and the resistances and censorship imposed by the ego as a 'struggle' (1913: 143), or a battle in which 'The patient brings out of the armoury of the past the weapons with which he defends himself against the progress of the treatment . . .' (1914: 151).

This struggle metaphor poses a problem. It is partly a trick of the English translation that one tends to think of 'the unconscious' as a delimited identity, consisting only of the contents of what is repressed and, moreover, to think of the unconscious as the obstacle to the realization of ideas and perceptions which would otherwise be available to consciousness. Freud's main metapsychological statement on the unconscious is titled '*Das Unbewusste*' (1915). The German term has the grammatical form of a passive participle. It has more the sense of that which is 'not consciously known' (1915: 165, ed. n. 1). The German puts the emphasis on consciousness as the agency which fails to know, rather than on 'the unconscious' as the force which withholds information. This suggests that one meaning of Freud's notion of the 'struggle'

is that certain processes and information desire to make themselves known to consciousness. It is not so much that it is unconscious. It is more that we are unconscious of it.

Yet Freud's main and most familiar sense of the unconscious is that it is contingent on repression. Repression, as Lacan and Klein have argued, is the condition of maintaining a distinct and moderately functional identity. Certain ideas and perceptions have to be excluded, and those which are excluded are those which are incompatible with the subject's identity. The most famous of these ideas and perceptions are the repressed sexual wishes, which seek to make themselves known to consciousness, and lead to a battle of their own in the form of symptoms.

But Freud lists other, more timely factors on the side of the struggle for consciousness. On the side of health, the desire to consciously know, he places the patient's wish to be free of suffering, the 'love of truth' (cf. Freud, 1937: 248), the capacity to consider new information thoughtfully, and the belief that the future can be better (for instance, 1914: 152 and *passim*). Whether these forces, like the repressed wish, are unconscious is not addressed.

But if one thinks about it, the wish to be free of suffering, optimism about the future, openness to new ideas, even the 'love of truth', if the lie is literally mortifying, are all on the side of living. I think they embody the unconscious 'life-drive', a concept Freud never explained much, but adduced; something had to counter the death-drive (Freud, 1921). If one drive drove us towards death, the other opposed it.

More than this: while the various factors on the side of health are unspecified in relation to their conscious or unconscious status, there is another sense in which any factor embodying the wish to live (and this is especially true of the life drive) has to be synonymous with consciousness. As Freud (1915) defined it elsewhere, to be conscious is precisely to be alive: this is his bottom line in his initial comparison of conscious and unconscious states. To be unconscious is to be dead or asleep or knocked out.

How then are we to reconcile this situation, where we are unconscious of that which keeps us conscious? Rather than dismiss this as a typical Freudian confusion, I want to propose that we take it literally. The issue is precisely how we stay unconscious of that which seems to be equivalent to consciousness. This means that we can recast the players here. They are not 'the ego' and 'the unconscious'. At least, the ego is still a player, but it is an ego that keeps itself unconscious of a certain form of consciousness. But as the ego is identified with consciousness, as it is one's conscious identity, this recasting leads in turn to the proposition that there are in fact two consciousnesses, with a repressive apparatus in between them. In other words, from this standpoint, the relation between consciousness and the unconscious is actually a relation between two different forms of consciousness.

Consciousness 1 is what we usually understand by the term consciousness. This Consciousness, as it is usually defined, is the conscious intentionality Freud associates with the ego. It is the awareness/perception system of the individual; it is social consciousness, and it is, incidentally, fairly slow. It is the repository of received views, planning in advance and

one form of intentionality. Consciousness 2, otherwise known as the life-drive, is an energetic biological and physical force which is *mindful* and, incidentally, speedy: it knows in a flash.<sup>1</sup> I would go further. Consciousness 2, as the life-drive, is that force that *is* life (that quality that is lost with death), a force which we repress when it gives rise to unplanned ideas or actions which are not already inscribed, and, in this sense, social.

From this standpoint, the 'unconscious' is not only an obstacle, but the vehicle for the expression of Consciousness 2, a life-drive held in common. This means it is both the vehicle for an energetic stream of disruptive perceptions and ideas on the one hand, and a series of repressed blocks, received views or fixed points on the other. As a life-drive, a necessarily moving force, Consciousness 2 might make its effects felt most at those moments when we are surprised by new ideas, for which we subsequently take possessive credit. But there is nothing about Consciousness 2 that is individual. Indeed, it is the assumption that intelligence (and with it consciousness) are individually self-contained that stands in the way of the idea I am putting forward. As we will see, Consciousness 2 is repressed because it conflicts with our sense of individual distinctness.

But first, and in this connection, note that Freud claimed that the life-drive was on the side of the species, against the individual ego (Freud, 1921). Thus the life-drive was on the side of sex, which diverted libidinal attention away from oneself and on to the other. So far so good, except for the procreative implications. Once these are detailed, Freud's position on the life-drive is thoroughly contradictory. On the one hand he associates it with procreation. On the other, he associates it with all sex. If the life-drive is expressed in all sex (as Eros) and if it is opposed to imposed identities, this should mean that the imposition of a normative sexual identity could block it. In part, this problem is resolved if the opposition to the ego's socially constructed identity is Consciousness 2, which is opposed to what blocks liveliness or livingness as such.

Back to the opposition between egoic intentionality and the life-drive, or Consciousness 2. To an extent, Lacan (cf. Brennan, 1993: Ch. 3) recognizes the opposition, in that he claims that the life-drive is really the death-drive so far as the ego is concerned. This idea, which in typical fashion he did not elucidate, makes more sense once it is stressed that it is the individual identity that is constructed. It may be constructed in relation to common social reference points, but it is nonetheless felt as an individual container. It is felt as fixed, and its fixity can be explained by the notion that the reference points with which the ego identifies (people, institutions and ideas) are precisely fixed. They are the means by which the ego gets its bearings (Brennan, 1992).

Freud thought death was on the side of fixity and repetition. He stopped short of saying it was on the side of the ego. He could not do this, having assigned the ego to the side of life, and made it the vehicle of the perception-consciousness system. Yet, as noted, his reasoning implied that the life-drive was unfriendly to the ego or distinct individual identity in other ways.

There are outstanding cases of this unfriendliness. Mozart's is the most notorious. But the poet Rilke is another. Reflecting on the terrible Angel of inspiration (Consciousness 2 in this account), an exhausted Rilke (1923) still begged to point out that humans are finite, they need to be loved, they get tired, too much of life can kill them, and other things that are incomprehensible to Angels.

However they are experienced, in writing, active loving, or the battle of the treatment, Consciousness 2 – the lively factors or forces Freud identified – disrupt one's fixed identity, and go further than, or away from, the existing and more likely to be socially accepted state of affairs. They have to; they are on the side which will help disrupt the subject's preordained beliefs. For this reason, they are always more original. Yet there is nothing about Consciousness 2 that means it has a specific individual content; it is an energetic if mindful force that seeks opportunities to keep living. Because it competes with received views, and hence relatively fixed ideas, it has none of the defining properties that mark out individually distinct identities, which are necessarily composed of social reference points. This is the burden of constructivism. In saying there has to be more to it, I am saying something similar to what Searle (1995) does when he contrasts constructed social reality with 'brute' reality. But I am crediting the brute with more mindfulness and less individual distinctness than (I think) he would care to do.

Given more space, what I should address now is the idea that this life-drive, Consciousness 2, is held in common, an idea that Spinoza has elaborated in a different vocabulary.<sup>2</sup> By this, I do not mean that it is essentially the same in everyone. I also mean that it connects being to being. But, apart from the fact that I have tried to show at length elsewhere (Brennan, 1992, 1993) why Freud's work was severely limited by the illusion that subjects were energetically self-contained, there is still a psychical problem with how it is that fresh ideas emerge.

In one respect, it is not a problem that is easily solved because everything that comes from 'the unconscious', meaning Consciousness 2, is already circumscribed by the range of available representations. As we learn from Freud, it is, for example, only the *impulse* to dream which comes from 'the unconscious'. The means for *representing* the impulse comes from the preconscious. The thoughts in which this impulse takes shape, the language in which it expresses itself, is given to it by the preconscious (Freud, 1900: 562).<sup>3</sup>

As this example from the dream is illuminating for the fresh ideas problem, I will, at the risk of digression, stay with it for another paragraph or two. Whatever the information or force arising from the impulse to dream, it may only express itself in thoughts which have been constituted by the subject at some point, even if they are later repressed. Hence part of the difficulty in any systematic elaboration of ideas which tell a truth about the subject, especially if it is an idea the subject does not want to know about. In principle, then, thinking is restricted by the fact that we are always thinking in established linguistic terms.



But there is a more basic question. Why does the censored impulse behind the dream grow stronger, or seek expression more successfully, in *sleep*? This takes us to another thing that Consciousness 2 makes sense of: the refreshing nature of sleep, especially dream-sleep. This is a puzzle from the standpoint of a theory which describes being dead and being asleep as two versions of the state of being unconscious. This is reasonable enough if the focus is on the fact, as it was for Freud, that in both states, the ego is suspended. The ego, remember, is identified by Freud with the perception-consciousness system (and identified by me with identity as such). As Freud also noted, the stronger the ego, the less you sleep. Yet it is the ego's very suspension which coincides with rejuvenation. Both the rejuvenation and the stronger impulse to dream are consonant with the definition of Consciousness 2 offered here: a definition which makes it coincident with the life-drive in the most literal sense (that which keeps us living) and coincident with an intelligent mindfulness that provides us with fresh insights, despite the opposition of Consciousness 1.

In addition, we do have a notion of an *impulse* from the unconscious which seeks expression. I have tied this impulse to Consciousness 2, the life-drive. This drive works with the available range of representations to find a way through those of them that are deadening. This means that Consciousness 2 seeks to express itself despite the obstacles of available language and the censorship imposed upon it. Perhaps the only way it can do this is by shifting the energetic emphasis on different ideas, which brings them into different alignments which open out novel perspectives. Energetic shifts may also be why something we have only half-formulated, been vaguely aware of, or even always known, can strike us with a force it lacked hitherto. But this notion of energetic shifts, as with everything else I have written here about a moving force, life-drive, Spinoza's One Substance, Nietzsche's will, whatever you call it, can only be inferred. But the basis for the inference is strong: something has to be the source of the energy we move with, and of the perceptions that conflict with the subject's constructed view of itself, others and reality. We can infer, too, that these perceptive ideas are not readily available to consciousness. They have to be fought for.

In psychoanalytic treatment, fresh thoughts (insights, as they are termed) are won when the wishes that were bound to the past are brought into the present. I suggest that how they are won in everyday life is a measure of how far a given identity is fixed on to ideas which deaden it. For that matter, overcoming the obstacles that stand between fresh ideas, or Consciousness 2, and Consciousness 1 is what makes acting, thinking and writing into a labour. In this labour, the ideas that emerge are less the source of personal credit than is the labour of letting them through. This labour, and labour is always an energetic process, is one which involves moving from beneath the weight of imposed ideas, moving from the fixed position in any relational, institutional or intellectual context.

The labour factor means that we can talk of genius as democratic. It means this because it puts the emphasis not on the inspiration (which by this account is commonly available) but on the process by which the ideas



come home. At the same time, what remains individual is the labour of letting Consciousness 2 through. To illustrate this here, I wish to invoke the concept of the creativity demon.

The creativity demon has four feet. The rest of its anatomy does not matter. The fact that it is a quadruped is all that is of interest now. It is of interest because there are, by contrast, five wellsprings in the mind through which the moving force of Consciousness 2, the life-drive, flows. The demon is powerful, but it is able only to cover up four of the well-springs at a time. This means of course that the fifth spring can flow unimpeded. Now, as imperfect subjects know, what happens when you sit down to write on one subject is that you are involuntarily seized with a flow of good ideas or purposeful actions in another arena altogether. You immediately have the energy to tackle the correspondence pile, for instance. This is because the demon has had to take one of its feet off the wellspring that waters correspondence and relocated it on the spring destined for (for instance) ‘Searle and Gazzinga: Lindemann Conference’.

What is individual is not the water that feeds the wells. What is individual is the cussedness, stubbornness or sheer determination that lets the stream build up enough steam to force one of the demon’s feet to relinquish its hold. So on the one hand, labour itself is not the source of ideas. On the other, it is their necessary vehicle. From this perspective, we can make a little sense of the paradox of labour in, say, the Christian tradition, where, first, labour is what you shouldn’t do (‘Look at the lilies of the field, that neither toil nor spin’) but, second, what you should (‘Come to me all ye who labour and I will give you rest’). The same paradox informs Marxism. On the one hand, those who labour shall inherit the earth. On the other, labour is defined as the expenditure of energy in the face of a sensuousness that resists it (Marx, 1959: 85 and *passim*). Before Marx, there is Hegel’s understanding of the ‘labour of the concept’, the *Arbeit des Begriffs*, meaning the work of the concept to realize itself. For Adorno, this work is really social labour masquerading as logic, and the absolute spirit is nothing more than society (Adorno, 1993: 23). To these we can now add a fourth option, closer to Hegel, but less absolute: labour is the opposition (drawing on the senses) to what Lacan elliptically refers to as the ego’s ‘inertia’ (Lacan, 1953: 12). Or, in this vocabulary, to the ego’s preconceptions, the established fixed points that make a constructed identity reluctant to let a new impulse escape unchecked into the world of signification.

### Notes

This article was presented in a plenary with John Searle and Michael Gazzinga at the Lindemann Conference, New York, in 1996. I would like to thank both for their comments.

1. Cf. Brennan (1993: Ch. 5), on the time factor. This argument does not take account of the two forms of consciousness, but is consistent with it.
2. Hampshire (1976) compares Spinoza’s *conatus* to Freud’s libido.
3. Freud’s fluctuations (especially Freud, 1915a) about whether or not a drive was a psychical representation of psychical energy, or a direct manifestation of that

energy, could be a reflection of this difficulty: the only language available to the impulse is the language that also censors it.

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**Teresa Brennan** teaches sociology at Brandeis. Her publications include *Jenseits der Hybris: Bausteine einer neuen Ökonomie* (Fischer, 1997), *Vision in Context* (edited with Martin Jay; Routledge, 1996), *History after Lacan* (1993), *Interpretation of the Flesh* (1992) and *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1989).